

# Aspects of Portrait Photography

## Background Notes

Barry Venning — 7 June 2023



Léonce Raphael Agbodjélou b. 1965, Porto-Novo, Benin: **Untitled** (*Musclemen series*), 2012. C – print. 85 x 57 cm. Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery, Glasgow.

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The first demonstrations of photography were given in 1839 in Paris and London, by Louis Daguerre (1787-1851) and William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877) respectively. Together, their photographic processes – Daguerre’s eponymous daguerreotype and Fox Talbot’s calotype - brought about a revolution in the history of the visual arts through the accuracy and apparent objectivity of their images, and through the fact that those same images were nearly instantaneous. They cost far less to produce than a painting or a print and they did not require years of professional training, both of which led to a democratisation of image making. Furthermore, photography enabled the mass-production and circulation of images, which meant that the new processes had a significant part to play in the dissemination of knowledge of all kinds.

The two earliest photographic processes were far from perfect because each lacked what the other had: daguerreotypes were sharply, beautifully detailed, but existed only as a single, fragile image; Fox Talbot’s calotypes could be printed as multiples, but the process used paper negatives, which meant that the prints were grainy and lacking in detail. For all their shortcomings, however, photography was taken up with alacrity, at first in Europe and America, but within ten years, it had spread as far afield as India, Africa and Australia. One of the first uses to which it was put, and later the most commonplace, was portraiture. It is generally accepted that the earliest photographic portraits were taken in 1839 and 1840 by the American scientist, John William Draper (1811-1882), using the daguerreotype process. His subjects included himself, his family and his colleague, the inventor, painter and fellow photographer, Samuel Morse (1791-1872), of Morse code fame.

Photographic technology was greatly improved with the invention in 1851, by the British sculptor, Frederick Scott Archer (1813-57), of the collodion process, which permitted the use of glass negatives and, therefore, the production of multiple, high quality images on salted paper. Scott Archer nobly refused to copyright his process, which greatly increased the accessibility of photography for the general public. Photographic kits became affordable by the middling classes, portrait sittings were less expensive and the number of professional portrait studios increased dramatically. One of the most fashionable studios was that of the Parisian, Gaspard-Félix Tournachon (1820-1910), who was known by the pseudonym Nadar. In addition to his day-to-day portrait practice, which was largely carried out by employees, Nadar also photographed the most famous individuals of his day, including the poet Baudelaire, the composer Rossini, the artist Manet and the actress Sarah Bernhardt. The latter was only twenty and beginning her career when she posed for Nadar in 1864 (1); his ravishing photographs of the young singer and actress helped to propel her into what would now be described as superstardom.



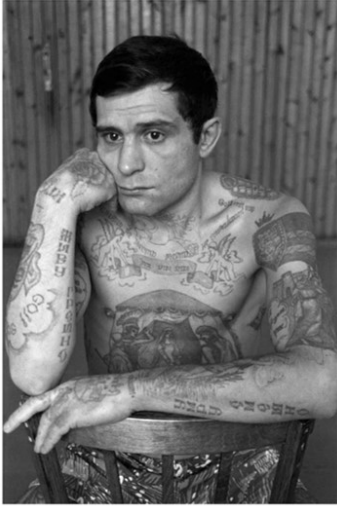
(1) Nadar: **Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923)**. c. 1864. Gelatin silver print.  
21.1 × 16.2 cm. The J Paul Getty Museum.

The modern cult of celebrity depends upon the mass production and consumption of photographic images and, to that end, in 1854, the French photographer and entrepreneur André Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri (1819-89), patented a method of printing up to eight small photographic portraits simultaneously on a single sheet of paper, using a box camera with eight separate lenses. These *carte de visite* (visiting card) photographs were avidly collected, to the point where there might be hundreds of thousands of images of the most popular subjects in circulation. In 1860, Queen Victoria permitted JJE Mayall (1830-1901) to breach the strict code of privacy that had previously governed photographs of the Royal Family by taking *carte de visite* photographs of her and, for the first time, publishing them. This event modified the relationship between the Monarch and her subjects, drawing them much closer. The *carte de visite* photograph was the precursor of the sporting and celebrity photographs that were collected by, among others, Andy Warhol (1928-1987), whose obsession with celebrity was a cornerstone of his art.

Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879) recorded the likeness of some of the most celebrated and distinguished individuals of her era, including Darwin and Tennyson, but she did so in order to present them as models of intellect, creativity and humanity, to whose qualities her fellow Victorians could aspire. At the opposite extreme of this was the use of photographic portraits in the study and detection of crime. The apprehension of criminals was a hit-and-miss affair in the era before photography, for without any means of circulating a wrong-doer's likeness, there was minimal chance of an arrest. The earliest photographs of criminals were taken in the 1840s, but they were occasional and unsystematic. This situation changed in 1888, when Alphonse Bertillon (1853-1914), a French police officer and biometrics researcher, invented the modern 'mug shot' featuring full face and profile views, standardizing the lighting and angles. This system was soon adopted throughout Europe, the United States and Russia.

In the Khrushchev era, Russian criminologists extended Bertillon's system by systematically recording and photographing the tattooed bodies of incarcerated criminals. A Soviet era criminalist, Arkady Bronnikov, realised that a criminal's tattoos were coded and standardised references to the crimes they had committed and to their status in the criminal underworld. Together with a sketch artist, Danzig Baldaev, and a photographer, Sergei Vasiliev, he developed the *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia (2)*. Vasiliev's photographs supplied hard evidence of the designs' authenticity and of their subjects' criminality, but they were also Vasiliev's humanizing record that places the faces and bodies of the tattoos' owners (at one point one in five of the Soviet population) right at the centre of the project.

Photographic portraiture was also integral to the work of Paul Ekman (b. 1934), who also made a notable contribution to modern criminology, although that was not his original intention. Ekman is a psychologist whose specialism is non-verbal behaviour and, in particular, facial expression. He used video and photographic methods to record what he described as 'micro-expressions', tiny, fleeting expressions over which an individual has no control, and that indicate emotions and, in certain circumstances, whether someone is telling the truth or not. His system has been used by the FBI and the CIA, and has also been applied, unofficially, to at least two American presidents.



**(2)** Sergei Vasiliev: *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia Print No.7*, 1966, Giclée print, 165 x 112 cm. Fuel Publishing, London.



**(3)** Ulric Collette: *Grandmother/Granddaughter Ginette, 61 and Ismaëlle, 12*, 2013. Digital image. Dimensions variable.

Ekman used portrait photography in the service of psychology. Ulric Collette (b. 1979), a graphic designer, art director and self-taught photographer, has employed it in the study of genetics, heredity and identity. Although he has no scientific background, Collette's 'double portraits', which juxtapose half-portraits of mother/daughter, brother/sister, cousins, etc. are a vivid and unforgettable demonstration of the genetic similarities between different members of the same family **(3)**.

Photography has been regarded from the outset as a truthful record of someone's appearance and even their character. Since the later C19, however, there has been a notable counter-tendency to this, which takes the form of masquerade, in which individuals dress up and mimic the appearances of others. The most famous practitioner of this is the American artist Cindy Sherman (b. 1954), who began in the late 1970s by photographing herself in female roles based on the stereotypical depiction of women in film, advertising and television. But the habit of masquerade predates Sherman's work by more than a century. In India, from the late 1850s onwards, Ram Singh II, Maharajah of Jaipur

(1833-1880), produced an extraordinary series of unofficial self-portraits in which he assumed the guises of, among others, a Hindu ascetic or sadhu, or a devotee of Shiva. More recently, masquerade has been central to the work of the Cameroonian photographer, Samuel Fosso (b.1962), who has adopted a series of specific personae, including the African leaders, Haile Selasse and Kwame Nkrumah, as well as Black American civil rights activists such as Malcolm X or Angela Davis. His work reflects on the history of Africa, on the struggle for Black civil rights and, occasionally, as with his *Self Portrait (Black Pope)*, he imagines himself in roles that no Black person has ever held **(4)**.



**(4)** Samuel Fosso: *Self-Portrait (Black Pope)* 2017. Chromogenic print. Dimensions unknown. Walther Collection, New York.

Fosso is recognised as one of Africa's leading contemporary artists, as is his Beninese contemporary, Léonce Raphael Agbodjélou (b. 1965), whose unnamed portraits of the citizens of Benin's capital, Porto-Novo, taken over a period of thirty years, such as his *Musclemen* series (**front cover**), are shot against the vividly patterned batik fabrics that are a staple of Beninese and Nigerian attire. Fosso and Agbodjelou both work in strident colour and produce flamboyant images, but there is another tradition of West African commercial black and white portrait photography that is, in its own way, equally impressive, and has grown in status and recognition over the last twenty years.

Malick Sidibé (b. 1936, Soloba, Mali) and Sanlé Sory (b. 1943, Burkino-Faso) were exemplary in capturing the eccentric behaviour of the younger generation of West Africans, who were thrilled by the appearance of new music, dance and fashion genres from the USA and Europe in their newly independent countries. Both artists rose from being commercial photographers to international acclaim, with Sidibé honoured by the Venice Biennale in 2015 and Sory being the first African photographer to have a one man show at a major American Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, in 2018. The work of Rachidi Bissiriou (b. 1950, Benin), is far less extrovert than that of Sory or Sidibé, and it appears at first to be modest in its ambitions. Bissiriou set up his Studio Pleasure in his home town of Kétou, in Central Benin, in 1968, and photographed its residents, tradesmen, his neighbours and friends he had known for years. Individuals and groups were captured in the street or against a neutral background in traditional or occupational dress, all appearing relaxed and at home. This natural photographic style, which is particularly evident in his ***Nun with the Celestial Church of Christ*** of 1970 (5), is rare in a period of West African photography where most images are carefully staged and posed, and has helped turn Bissiriou's oeuvre into the culturally and historically significant body of work that it is today.



(5) Rachidi Bissiriou (Benin). ***Nun with the Celestial Church of Christ***. 1970. Gelatine silver print. *Courtesy of David Hill Gallery, Rachidi Bissiriou and Auto Portrait.*

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